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ABSTRACT

College English teachers today, in responding to black writers' demands for a forum, frequently resemble the old carpetbaggers, in that their teaching of black literature or composition reveals little or no background knowledge of the subject, with the course often being only a smoke screen for an informal study in something else. Such exploitation can be avoided, however, if English teachers with the necessary dual love for subject and student will become thoroughly acquainted with black literature, sustaining their studies on the foundation of scholarship and literary criticism. In the process, both valuable library materials and black student interest must be maintained. With a serious approach, the important creative atmosphere may be provided, and student respect may be earned. (JM)

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THE NEW CARPETBAGGERS, BLACK LITERATURE AND ACADEMIA'S REVOLVING DOOR.

Robert Lowell once confessed that, as a young man, he too had feared the rejection slip. Which is to say, he worried that none of his poems would ever get published. Now, of course, he worries even harder because all of them will. Thus was it ever for serious writers. Neglect may be discouraging, but too much attention can be downright destructive. Contemporary black writers share in all the usual anxieties--and add some distinctive wrinkles all their own. Rather than that still small voice one must learn, painfully, first to hear and then to trust, the black writer is constantly threatened by the noise our culture makes.

It would be easy enough to fix the blame on others: angry blacks, guilt-ridden whites, politicians of any color or our favorite whipping boys, the sociologists. However, a meeting of the College English Association seems the proper place to suggest that we have met the enemy and they are us. The old carpetbaggers sniffed out the possibilities of exploitation and headed South. Their modern counterparts invade the campuses armed with black anthologies and an eye for the black gold to be made from black ink. In this regard Cassandra's prophecy is still good advice: Beware of white men bearing gifts! Literary fashion is, at best, a sometime thing and, historically speaking, black writers have been its sacrificial victims. I see little difference between the pressures which made, say, a Paul Lawrence Dunbar write dialect poems about contented darkies and those which insist that anger is the only chord authentic black literature can strike. Like Art itself, pressure

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is ultimately colorless, but it is a very real fact of life for aspiring black writers. To be sure, as teachers and critics we have little to say about the getting and spending that publishers do; our eyes, presumably, are not on the registers which ring in college bookshops. But we manage to contribute to the general level of noise pollution about black writing nonetheless. We watch enrollment figures, anguish over student evaluations and gauge our careers against the prevailing winds. All this may be a human enough response--particularly in view of the wretched job market--but, at times, it all sounds like an academic version of the Sunoco ad: "I have a wife, two kids and I'm coming up for tenure. I can be very friendly!"

Unfortunately, pragmatism is not the whole story. There is a wide stripe of hubris as well. We labor under the grand illusion that teachers of English can make things happen. Auden, you will remember, apparently felt that not even poems could do that, much less the teachers of poetry. But the new carpetbaggers would replace one brand of exploitation with another. For them, rhetoric--rather than poetry--is the real issue. They can wake us, instantly, from the nightmare that is history; they can undo its damage. In all the heady discussion about old scores settled and a better world begun (right before our very eyes--in class no less!), it is hardly surprising that individual writers and their struggles with language get short shrift.

Of course nothing either solid or lasting can be built on such well-meaning sand. But that is exactly the point and where the old rub of playing the black writer as pawn rears its head once more. All too often courses in black literature have become a convenient smoke screen for highly informal "study" in something else--black consciousness-raising, masochistic white guilt-letting and a rainbow of encounter therapies. The older designation for such activities--the dormitory bull sessions--was probably a more accurate

description, but one which would look suspicious in the catalogues of even our most advanced colleges. Black literature has a more respectable--and, I might add, more temporary--ring about it. And when Academia's revolving doors spit out the carpetbaggers, courses in black writing will get chucked out too.

Perhaps it is still not too late for us to do something about that. I submit that to teach black literature well requires hard work and God's plenty of real idealism. For all their noble language, the new carpetbaggers are essentially a cynical lot. In a world filled with assorted rip-offs, they respond in the only kind they know. But the dual love for subject and student which authentic teaching requires is another matter. Scholars of black literature--black and white--have an edge won by long years of dedicated study. For most of us this represents an investment of time and energy--to say nothing of talent--which we are unwilling and/or unable to make. Such is the stuff of which a healthy humility can be made. The first difficult step--for teachers as well as students--may be to know what we do not know.

This condition, I should quickly add, does not earmark one as a "new carpetbagger" in advance. Teaching black literature with sympathy is not the same thing as wallowing in that Sympathetic Fallacy which has become so prominent a feature of our belated responses to blacks and women. That is, one's political response to the feminist movement or to ghetto conditions is not the same thing as the evaluation of an artistic vision. To confuse the two is to do no justice to either. Literature demands a creative sympathy from its audience, one which makes of reading something akin to the imaginative act of writing. Besides, the black community is wonderfully pluralistic, full of attitudes and styles in lively contradiction with one another. To continue talking about the "black problem" in the singular is to radically reduce their

humanity to the level of a banal cliché.

The best hope for a sustained interest in black literature must rest on the foundation of scholarship and criticism. The Schomberg Collection at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library might be a good place to begin. Invaluable material lies there unused and in deteriorating shape because of funding stringencies. Surely the same sources which came to the rescue of the Library's main branch on Fifth Avenue might be tapped for dollars to be used farther uptown. But the sad fact is that those with the academic clout have more fashionable priorities. To pay lip service to black culture is one thing; to actively lobby to save their priceless library holdings is a grant of another color. In a similar fashion literary critics have beaten a hasty retreat at a time when an aesthetic foundation for the discussion of black literature is most needed. To be sure, academics are not particularly noted for their courage. In Hollywood melodramas a timid soul may rise to oppose easy targets like book burners or Fascists, but which of us relishes the thought of a toe-to-toe confrontation with a militant black about the poetry of Don L. Lee? Here discretion appears to be the better part of valour; white professors back off with a gingerly attitude nearly matching their approach in the first place. A curious attitude from those who claim, on one hand, to love literature and, on the other, that it is not worth fighting about.

Finally, a word about those constituents conspicuous by their absence--namely, the students of black literature. Whatever else they may be, they are--alas--a fickle lot. In the last year or so there has been an apathy about black studies that must be downright disheartening to those who pinned their academic wagons to this particular star. Now, I am told, black students want to be dentists. What are they to Richard Wright or Richard Wright to

them that they should study him? I am convinced such attitudes will change, although I am less confident about timetables than I used to be. However, we can learn at least the wisdom of standing firm while the pendulum of fashion swings. Black literature deserves our best efforts; it needs no apologists. And if we approach its complexities with seriousness we will realize at least two important by-products: we can help to provide that atmosphere Matthew Arnold felt was essential to creativity and we just may earn the respect of students who have little enough reason to respect us these days.